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Local Links with the Tuskar Rock Air Tragedy (1968)

By Ann Marie Desmond Ph. D, Ballycatten

On a fine spring day, Sunday 24th March 1968, an Air Lingus plane en route from Cork to Heathrow, London crashed off the Wexford coast of Ireland at around noon, just south of the Tuskar Rock region. The Viscount plane EI-AOM, EI 712, named St. Phelim (called after an early Christian hermit from Co. Meath) had taken off at 10.32 am from Cork Airport with sixty one people on board, four crew members and fifty seven passengers. There were no survivors.



Fig.1: An Aer Lingus Viscount in flight in the 1960's.

The first bodies of the victims were recovered from the sea on Monday 25th March eight miles off Rosslare-fourteen were recovered but the remaining forty seven bodies never were. One of the recovered was Michael Joe Cowhig from Kilbrittain; he was washed up off of the Welsh coast. There were no traces of burn marks on his body or clothing. The autopsy report revealed that he did not die from drowning. John Nyhan, Ballinspittle, a colleague of Michael Joe's at Moorepark Agricultural Research Institute (now known as *Teagasc*) was one of the bodies that was not found. Neither was the body of Nancy (McSwiney) Shorten (my husband's aunt), or her eighteen year old son Thomas. Her handbag and cheque-book were all that was returned to her family. Nancy and Thomas had planned on taking a later flight but had snapped up two cancellation tickets to return home to Wimbledon earlier to Nora (20), Olan (16) and Benjamin (15). The deceased have an unmarked grave somewhere on the ocean-bed of the Atlantic. Fr. Murphy in his homily at the 40th Anniversary of the tragedy said; "Many of the sixty one victims of Tuskar Rock were left without a tangible grave" (Irish Examiner 24.03.2008).



Fig.2: John Nyhan (third from left, front row) with his family.

I attended the 50th Anniversary Remembrance Mass last March 25th at Ballyphehane where Bishop Buckley said that the Tuskar Air Disaster was a particular tragedy for Cork as thirty six of those who died were from the city or county. He said he knew four of those who died on the ill-fated flight, former pupils of St. Finbarr's College, Farranferris; Ballinspittle's John Nyhan and Michael Cowhig from Kilbrittain, Ballyphehane parish priest, Fr. Edward Hegarty and Gus O'Brien from Douglas. Prayers were said for all sixty one victims as their names were read out and sixty one candles were lit during the Mass which was attended not only by relatives of the deceased, but by many retired staff from both Cork Airport and Aer Lingus who were working on the day of the tragedy (Irish Examiner April 4th 2018). A commemoration plaque base was blessed afterwards so as to remember the names of all the victims.

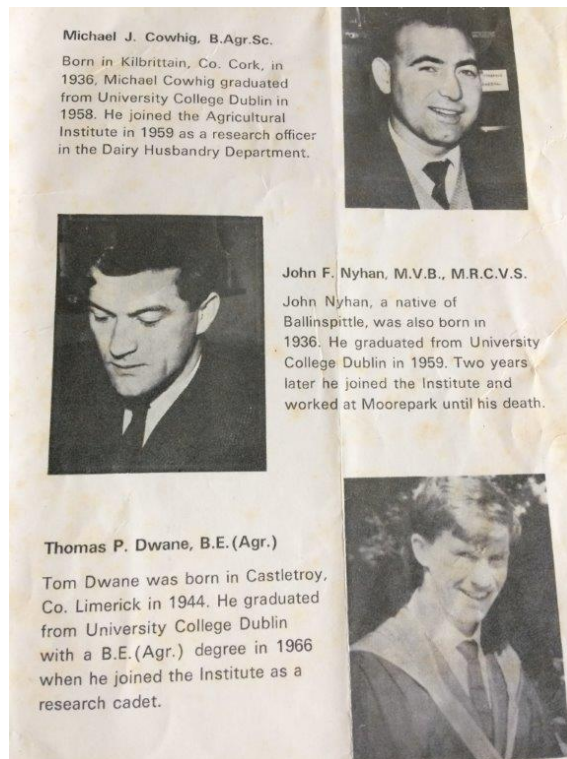


Fig.3: Biographical details of three of the victims published after the tragedy.

I visited Fr. Charlie Nyhan recently in Carraigaline who told me about his brother John F. Nyhan M.V.B., M.R.C.V.S. (32 Years), Michael J. Cowhig (B. Agr. Sc. 32 years old) and Thomas P. Dwane B.E. Agr. Co. Limerick, 24 years) who were on their way to a symposium at Reading to talk about their research into milking machine practice and mastitis control when disaster struck their plane.

In January 1968 Fr. Charlie had been dropped to Shannon airport (for his appointment as a priest in Peru) by his older brother John. In February 1968 John wrote excitedly to Fr. Charlie telling him of his planned trip to Reading with his two other brilliant colleagues. On Sunday morning 24th March around 6am Fr. Charlie woke from a dream about a plane crash. That evening he heard of a plane crash on BBC World News but got no information as there were no phones or electricity where his mission was. Fr. Charlie had this premonition up to Thursday when he accompanied Fr. Kevin O'Callaghan to Trujillo to collect his newspaper from the Monday before with the GAA headlines from Sunday, only to see a photograph of his brother as one of the victims of the Tuskar Rock Air crash on the front page. Because of the foreboding he had he wasn't as shocked as he could have been. He said he thought of his parents and siblings Kevin and Kay as well as John's wife Mary (Crowley from Timoleague) and their two little children Mark and Eunice. Bishop Lucey of Cork had sent the news to Charlie through a fellow priest Fr. Michael O'Riordan (Toames), who arrived back to Peru the following day, Friday

March 29th. Fr. Charlie came home from Peru three years later and visited Rosslare with Mary's Dad, Andy Crowley. Today John's name is inscribed on the family headstone at Templetrine Graveyard.



Fig.4: The Irish Times, Monday March 25th, 1968.

Fr. Charlie spoke of his role model John who was born seven years before him at Ballycatten, Ballinspittle. John wore the Courcsey Rovers Red and White hooped jersey with pride and was a very good hurler. He and his brother Kevin were also very involved in their local dramatic society, participating in plays at Ballinspittle hall and at Rossmore Festival. Their mentors were Fr. Gus Regan, Fr. Jack McCarthy and Fr. William Ahern. John went on to study Veterinary at Dublin University and graduated in 1959. Two years later he secured a job with Moorepark Research Institute. He did an advanced course in Micro Biology in Manchester in 1962. John and Mary Nyhan got married in 1963 and visited Fr. Charlie at the Irish College in Rome while on their honeymoon. John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline were on tour to Rome at that time and they saw them as they travelled through the city in an open air car. When asked about his views on what happened to cause the plane to crash Fr. Charlie replied; "I don't know. I'd like to know, but I don't know!" Fr. Charlie's first parish assignment had been at St. Winifred's in Wimbledon. After the Tuskar tragedy he reconnected with the Shorten children who had lost their mother Nancy (McSwiney) and their brother Thomas, as did Fr. Michael Murphy P.P. Ballyphehane and Fr. Richard Hurley, Newcestown.

There are more links to West Cork also on that tragic flight, including passengers Rita and Chris McCarthy from Skibbereen and Baltimore respectively, and their young son Jeremy, as well as Eileen Gallivan and her two daughters Marion (16 years old) and Paula (2 years old), who were

from Kilmurry. Nellie Quilnan from Macroom, also who had come home to attend her mother's funeral. Thirty five of the deceased were Irish, five British (Nancy and Nellie, Irishdiaspora), two were American (wife, Irish), nine Swiss and six Belgian anglers. Marcel Vastenavondt was one of the anglers who loved to fish each spring at Glenbeigh, he was forty two years old. His daughter Eliane told me:

"It was a real shock for my mother as well as for my father's parents as he was their only child. The fact that no remains were found made the trauma even worse. In the 1950's, before his marriage, my father had participated with the US Army to the Korean conflict, he travelled all the world around and came back alive after more than one year without news, and as such my grand-mother couldn't believe he was dead. During months and years after the crash, she liked to believe he could have been swimming – my father was a very sportive man. (Perhaps) he was fished up by a boat but may have lost his memory? All those kind of questions that haunt you, for the rest of your life!"

Jacques Creyelman a friend of Marcel's also perished. His son Philippe emailed me recently:

"My father Jacques was among the victims of the 1968 St. Phelim crash near Tuskar Rock. I was 15 when the tragedy occurred. Growing up without a father is tough. You miss a lot of things. My mother and I managed to keep on with our lives but the pain still hurts. I do not wish anyone to experience such a loss."

The plane crew consisted of 35 year old Captain Barney O'Beirne, 22year old First Officer Paul Heffernan and two airline stewardesses Anne Kelly (one of the fourteen bodies recovered) and Mary Coughlan who had only been working with the airline for one month and had changed shifts with a colleague that day. The Vickers Viscount Aircraft were very popular with Air Lingus at that time for short or medium haul flights. It was propeller driven and loved by pilots; "The Viscount was a new design, powered by turbine engines with a pressurized hull which climbed above the weather. It was fast, roomy and comfortable" (Reynolds, p.52).

This tragedy was the worst in Irish aviation history involving an Irish plane but irrespective of that, numerous investigations into the cause of the tragedy and several reports later show that there is still "no set of established facts has been able to show what actually caused the plane to crash with such a devastating loss of life" (The Guardian 11-01-99). The lack of clarity and closure has caused much heartache for the relatives of the survivors. The Viscount had reached an altitude of 17,000 feet, then 15,000 feet for a while, before it plunged into the sea off the Wexford coast. The last words heard from the twenty two year old First Officer Paul Heffernan of the St. Phelim, recorded by London Air Traffic Control, were at 11.57 am as the plane moved along its designated course just south of Hook Head on that sunny spring morning: "Twelve thousand feet, spinning rapidly!"



Fig.5: A large piece of the wreckage of the St. Phelim being hauled up during the recovery operation.

Many theories abound as to what caused the plane to spin rapidly and plunge into the Atlantic Sea. There was no black box fitted to this ten year old aircraft for forensics to examine and it took many months before the plane wreck was located and partly recovered from the sea. About one third of the plane was salvaged, the tail was never recovered. From the very start of the inquiries aviation experts speculated that the manner in which the plane spun in an out of control fashion for twenty minutes, despite the captain's valiant efforts to regain control could only have been the result of some major structural damage or failure. Whether that failure or damage was internal or external will probably never now be known fifty years on.

The three main theories that have been advanced for the cause of the crash have been;

1. Another aircraft or drone in the vicinity hit the Viscount E1 712
2. Bird-Flight colliding with the tail of the Viscount
3. Mechanical failure of the Viscount

I will now briefly examine each of these theories in turn.

Aircraft or Drone according to the 1970 Report

Reports say a garbled message before the final one from the St. Phelim co-captain indicated that there was another aircraft in the vicinity. According to Elaine Vastenavondt's Mum who received news of her husband's death on the English Times a "shooting of missiles" was mentioned immediately after the tragedy but retracted subsequently by the journalist in question. The possibility that an accidental missile or drone strike from the Royal Air Force base at Aberporthin, Wales is credible given that it was located below the flight path of the St. Phelim.

A report in the Irish Press mentioned eyewitnesses seeing a drone-like object passing close to the Viscount on that morning. Against that theory is the fact that "no other plane other than the Viscount, civil or military, was reported or known to be in the area at that time, no aircraft

was missing; no aircraft carriers were operating in the area, and the missile and the target ranges on the Welsh coast were closed, it was a Sunday” (Irish Press 08/09/1970).

The results of the 1970 Report submitted by the Inspector of Accidents to the then Minister for Transport, Mr. R. W. O’Sullivan suggested that a drone could have been responsible, but could not be proven conclusively as only part of the wreckage was recovered. This conclusion was rejected by the family of the American couple Joseph and Mary Gangelhoff who hired a private detective to initiate an independent inquiry to uncover the truth of the plane crash. The investigators report did little to establish clearer facts but did succeed in keeping the public debate on the Tuskar Tragedy alive. In 1974 the recovery of a damaged wing renewed speculation that a mid-air collision may have caused the Viscount to crash back in 1968. In 1998 it was revealed that a secret British Report on the Royal Navy’s role in the search by the Air Accident Investigation Branch (AAIB) had been reviewed in 1994 but was “not selected by the Public Record Office for permanent preservation in the National Archive and was destroyed at that time” (Irish Independent 19/01/99).

| File Reference | Pact | 'K' or 'D' | Description | Reviewer | Comment |
|----------------|------|------------|---|----------|---|
| Q38 | | K | Aer Lingus Viscount 802, EI-AQM in sea (St. George's Channel) on route Cork - London, 24th March, 1968. investigation by Irish authorities. | | Major accident - exhaustive inquiry (with A.I.B. assistance) - cause remaining a mystery. |
| Q39 | TJ.3 | K | Ditto: salvage operation; ministerial correspondence on funding. | | Ditto |
| Q39 | | D | Cosmo A11 NA-952T (U.S.) non-combat, Greece, 19th April, 1968. (from Greek authorities on 19th April 1968). | | C/E/NP |

Fig.6: Part of the original documentation relating to the accident that was later reviewed in subsequent reports.

I think it is very disappointing that more effort was not put into the recovery of the dead at the time of the accident. It seems that local trawlers who offered help in the aftermath of the accident were turned away from the crash site “in case their nets disturbed the wreckage” (Irish Examiner 24/03/18). The Irish State lacked the financial commitment as well as a proper equipped naval service to carry out a full-scale search and rescue operation so the British military took charge. The first salvage phase occurred between 12th-22nd June 1968 and the second salvage phase between 15th-14th July 1968. The Irish Government Investigation Report of 2002 claims that the outcome of these salvage phases was very limited due to the fact that insufficient evidence could be gleaned from what was recovered of the wreckage as to the cause of the crash. What was recovered of the plane “was disposed of without adequate notice to interested parties who may have wished to examine same” (Irish Examiner 24/03/18). The records of the British vessels working on the search are also understood to be missing-HMS

Penelope, HMS Shoudton, HMS Clarbeston, HMS Iveston, HMS Nurton, HMS Bronnington, HMS Reclaim (diving & Rescue).

Some kind of Major Structural Failure according to the 2002 Report

In 1998 the *Tuskar Relatives Support Group* was established and they petitioned the then Minister for Public Enterprise Mary O'Rourke to commission a new report. She was astonished that no written report had been drawn up by the state's airline in 1968 especially given the fact that 61 passengers and crew had been lost; all they had was a recall of the oral presentations made to the Aer Lingus Board at that time. "The release of documents by the National Archive Office in Dublin on January 1st under the Thirty Year Rule only revealed a small file involving letters of condolence" (The Irish Echo 26/02/2011). In 2000 Aviation experts were hired from Australia and France and they concentrated on the mechanics of the aircraft. Mike Reynolds, aviator and author of "Tragedy at Tuskar Rock" (2003) was also a contributor to the 2002 Report. They found the tragedy was most likely caused by failure in the St. Phelim's tailfin, possibly due to metal fatigue, corrosion or bird flutter. However they did not fully rule out the possibility of the plane being struck by a missile or colliding with another aircraft. Mike Reynolds tracked the flight course and noticed an abnormal flight climb at around 10.40 hours, ten minutes after take-off (Reynolds, p.16). He also used a bulb from a Fasten Seat Belt/ No Smoking sign to prove that the signs were illuminated at the time of the crash (pp.20-23)-which suggest that they knew they were in trouble!

Their findings also revealed deeply disturbing elements of negligence such as the fact that the maintenance records of the St. Phelim were missing 12 months previous to the crash and nobody seemed to have noticed it. On 14th February 1968 a safety certificate was issued for the plane EI-AOM but it was not accompanied by a physical examination of the actual plane- only the paper work was examined. The man who issued that report was the same man who released the wreckage to Air Lingus and signed off on the 1970 Report in his capacity as Inspector of Accidents (p. 56 Reynolds). Aer Lingus had owned twelve Viscounts at the time of the crash and replaced them all with Boeings after the Tuskar tragedy. It seems that faults such as metal fatigue and corrosion at the tail section together with issues of square windows resulted in engineering difficulties from 1948 to 1995; so much so that by 1995 139 Viscounts world-wide had resulted in 1, 573 deaths. On a flight to Atlanta in 1995 a Viscount plane went on fire as a result of a small fatigue crack which had grown slowly to cause a disc to rupture.

"The lack of an adequate record-keeping system and the failure to use process sheets to document the step-by-step overhaul and inspection procedures contributed to the failure to detect the crack and, thus, to the accident" (Reynoldsp. 57).

The 2002 government report into the crash also highlighted errors such as the 1970 Report focusing exclusively on the likelihood of a missile strike or a pilotless drone. 'Inescapable' was a word they used to support the presence of a second unidentified flying machine" (Reynolds, p.4). The 1970 Report had dismissed as negative bird-flight by Greenland white-fronted geese but subsequent studies tracked Berwick's swans that could have been responsible for an air

collision with the plane. “I discovered that Berwick’s swans leave Ireland for Siberia and other breeding locations in March, crossing the Irish Sea and St. George’s Channel in the process” (Reynolds, p.15).

Eye witness accounts (which were ignored in the 1970’s Report) gave descriptions of a low-flying aircraft west of Waterford at about 10.45 am. The Air Track Reconstruction in 2002 shows that it was indeed 5,000 feet; but the certified transcripts of the audio radio tapes of Flight 712 at 10.58 am say “17,000 feet-by Barrow, nearing Stumble”(Reynolds, p. 122). These anomalies in the Shannon radio transcripts make it difficult to determine where exactly the plane was at the time of the crash, or did the captain attempt to turn back? Why was the first indication of distress only in their last few minutes?



Fig.7: Tuskar Rock Lighthouse located 11 km off the coast of Wexford.

In the book “States of Denial: the Tuskar Tragedy and Other Mysteries” (2013) by Carl Nally & Dermot Butler, they claim that dozens of witness evidence has been ignored over the years by several investigators (p. 103-113). In 2007 a retired British air force instructor, Eric Evers claimed that the crash was caused by a collision with a French-built military aircraft, in training with the air corps, which struck the Viscount after responding to a request to check the passenger plane’s undercarriage. “Both the French and Irish authorities colluded in a subsequent cover-up and the Fouga Magister wreckage may still be on the seabed off Wexford” (The Guardian 26/03/2013). Another newspaper report quoted Alan McCormick as saying it was “the biggest singular cover-up of death in the state, by the state” due to the lack of information and assistance to the relatives of those killed in the Tuskar Rock air disaster (Irish Independent 05/07/2000). “It is a depressing exercise to look at the manner in which some state institutions and other parties seek to protect themselves when confronted with credible conclusions such as those which form part of the 2002 study. They engage in a type of evasion-speak which is aimed solely at guarding their butts” (Reynolds, p. 149).

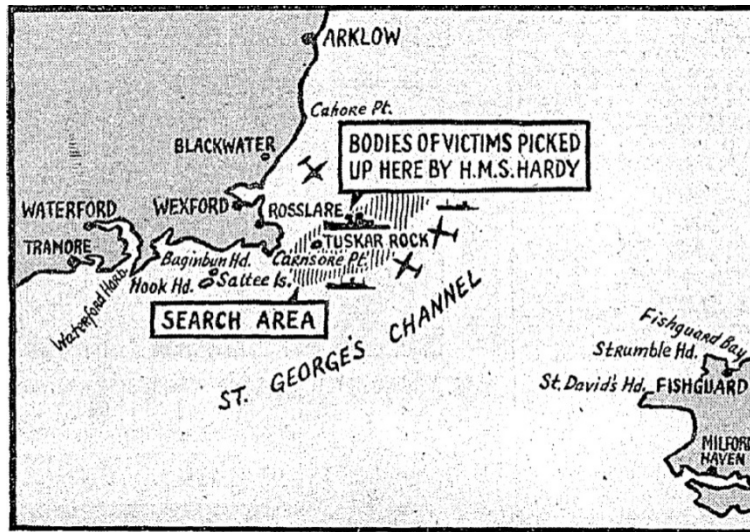


Fig.8: Diagram of the search area after the disaster.

A Memorial Park for the victims was erected at Rosslare Harbor in 2006. The relatives of the air disaster continue to meet there to commemorate their loved-ones. In 2018 for the 50th Anniversary a new stone was unveiled at the memorial park; it is intertwined with a chain which had a link for each one of those lost.



Fig.9: Memorial at Ballyphehane commemorating the victims of the Tusker Rock air disaster.

“It is important that we remember and continue to pay tribute to everybody involved in something that changed so many lives forever. For the relatives of the 61 people who died, life was never the same again but for all of the rescue services and the local men and women who opened up their hearts and their homes to assist in whatever way they could, they can never forget the sadness that permeated this corner of Ireland” (Leo Coy, Chairman, St Phelim 50th Commemoration Committee).

Thank you to: Fr. Charlie Nyhan, Mark Nyhan, Denis O`Brien, Leo Coy-Commemoration Committee, Anne Breen-Southern Star, and ElianeVastenavondt

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